

Degodi Lark *Mirafra degodiensis*, one of Africa's most poorly-known species

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Degodi Lark was described in 1975 from two specimens collected in 1971 from a site 11 km east of Bogol Manyo on the road to Dolo Odo in eastern most Sidamo Province in southern Ethiopia, 4°34'N, 41°38'E, but remains one of the most poorly-known species in Africa². The two specimens are held at the Museum National d'Histoire in Paris.

The species was re-discovered in February 1980 by John Ash and Tom and Katie Gullick¹ in the immediate area of the type locality where they found two birds 200–300 m apart after a seven and a half hour search. Two others were found about one km from the original site on the following day. The birds were found in an area of 3–4 m high acacias with scattered *Commiphora* and other bush species. These remained the only field observations until the authors in the company of A. Banwell, N. Bostock, S. Gantlett, K. Turner and S. Webb found the species in the same area in December 1995.

On 25 December a bird fitting Ash and Gullick's description was found 11 km east of Bogol Manyo on the south side of the road. The bird, a slim dull-coloured lark, somewhat pipit-like in appearance was watched for about an hour and sound recordings (figures 1 and 2) and photographs (page 86) were obtained. As described by Ash and Gullick the bird was entirely fearless as it fed unobtrusively in the shade of small acacias and bushes. It occasionally ran onto more open ground but always quickly retreated to the shade of the bushes!

On occasion, if pushed, the bird would fly to the top of nearby acacias, from where it would give its previously undescribed call which we would tentatively describe as a high-pitched two note *tsee-tsee*, the first note ascending in pitch, the latter descending. After calling for a minute or two the bird would fly a short distance to resume feeding on the ground.

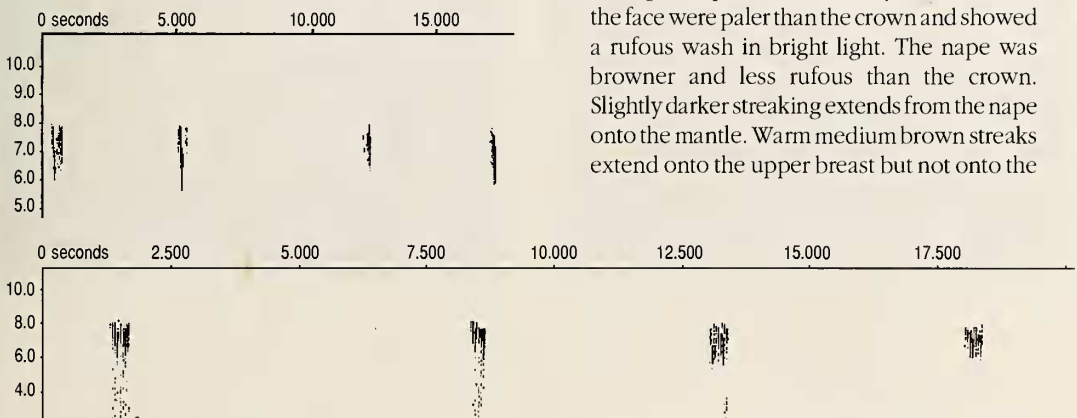
When the call was played back the bird would quickly reappear back on the tops of the acacias and begin calling or singing. We would describe the song as a 4–6 note high-pitched trill, *twill-ill-ill-ill-it* slightly reminiscent of Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*. The song was lower pitched than the call and on the same even pitch throughout. As mentioned above, the bird quickly responds to tape playback and this may prove a useful tool in determining the true range of the species.

Later in the day we located three further individuals, two birds 15 km east of Bogol Manyo on reddish soils (330 m asl) and a single bird 2 km further to the east (320 m asl). The following morning two more birds were found, in response to tape playback, during a brief roadside stop 17 km west of Bogol Manyo, the habitat at this point being considerably less open than the other area in which the species was recorded.

The following description was taken of the bird seen 15 km east of Bogol Manyo:

A fairly small lark, not appearing short-tailed. Slightly rufous wash to crown, strong whitish supercilium from lores to behind the top of the ear-coverts and thin dark brownish line through the prominent dark eye. The sides of the face were paler than the crown and showed a rufous wash in bright light. The nape was browner and less rufous than the crown. Slightly darker streaking extends from the nape onto the mantle. Warm medium brown streaks extend onto the upper breast but not onto the

Figures 1 and 2 Degodi Lark call



throat. The underparts were otherwise white. In some light the breast streaking appeared distinctly rufous. The uniform brown wings had pale feather edges but showed no rufous wash or panel. The dark centred median-coverts had broad pale edgings and formed a distinct dark narrow wing bar. The legs were pinkish the intensity of which varied according to the light conditions.

All the birds seen behaved as described above and we concur with Ash and Gullick that, contrary to Erard's original description of the specimens, the bird appears longtailed in the field.

The Bogol Manyo area is rarely visited despite holding a number of restricted-range species which are difficult to find elsewhere in Ethiopia or in neighbouring northern Kenya. These include African White-winged Dove *Streptopelia reichenowi*, Somali Short-billed Crombec *Sylvietta philippae*, Shining Sunbird *Nectarinia habessinica* and Jubaland Weaver *Ploceus dicrocephalus*, all of which were seen during our visit. Other exciting discoveries undoubtedly await adventurous birders visiting the area.

Further information on the area, including details of potential logistical difficulties, can be found in the full trip report which is available from ABC sales (see Club News p 71). The recordings of Degodi Lark together with recordings of 67 other Ethiopian species can be obtained direct from Steve Smith at the address below for UK£7.50 including postage and packing. ⑦

References

1. Ash, J.S. and Gullick, T.M. 1990. Field observations of the Degodi Lark *Mirafra degodiensis*. *Bull. Br. Orn. Club.* 110: 90-93.
2. Erard, C. 1975. Variation géographique de *Mirafra gilletti* Sharpe, description d'une espèce jumelle. *L'Oiseau et R.F.O.* 45: 293-312

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Degodi Lark *Mirafra degodiensis*, Bogol Manyo, Ethiopia, December 1995 (Steve Smith)